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ABSTRACT

Any advice and guidance offered to students about to embark on tertiary level distance education courses should help them to address problems that are not only practical and organizational, but also educational and intellectual. Students need to consider the suitability of distance education for their needs and circumstances as well as the intellectual demands of studying at the tertiary level. Several institutions provide assistance by means of materials in which a student-centered approach is adopted. These are designed to enable individuals to realistically assess their expectations and aspirations. Some examples of such materials are discussed in order to illustrate the advantages (and limitations) of this approach. Seven examples of materials for self evaluation by students are appended. These forms are designed to help the student: (1) analyze time used for studying; (2) assess his or her personal situation; (3) analyze family and friends' reactions to the student's decision to study with the Open University; (4) determine what the student expects to gain from such study; (5) assess the student's level of knowledge for a learning module and work that remains to be done; (6) evaluate progress in a course; and (7) identify the characteristics of a first-rate student. (9 references) (Author/EW)

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Enabling New Students to Examine their Expectations of Distance Learning

Some Examples from British and Australian Tertiary Institutions.

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Paper presented to the Second International Conference on The First Year Experience, Southampton, 20th - 24th July 1987.

Abstract

Any advice and guidance offered to students about to embark on tertiary level distance education courses should help them to address problems that are not only practical and organisational, but also educational and intellectual. Students need to consider the suitability of distance education for their needs and circumstances, and the intellectual demands of studying at tertiary level. Several institutions provide assistance by means of materials in which a student-centred approach is adopted. These attempt to enable individuals to realistically assess their expectations and aspirations. Some examples are discussed in order to illustrate the advantages (and limitations) of this approach.

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Distance Teaching Institutions and their Learners

In recent years there has been a worldwide trend towards greater use of distance education at the tertiary level. Distance teaching techniques have enabled many people to gain access to the higher levels of education, despite personal, domestic, occupational, geographical or other factors that might otherwise make such study impossible.

There are a number of institutions that provide courses only by distance education methods, for example the Open University in Britain, Athabaska University in Canada, Everyman's University in Israel, Allama Iqbal University in Pakistan, etc., while there are many more institutions that are 'dual mode', offering courses to on-campus as well as to external students. In dual mode institutions the quantity and quality of the teaching materials provided for students learning at a distance varies enormously, ranging from just a reading list, a few brief lecture notes and a set of assignment questions to specially prepared illustrated booklets with additional components in the form of audio-visual recordings, experiment kits, etc. Even more varied is the quantity and quality of the advice and guidance offered to intending students and the support provided for distance learners during their studies.

For a large proportion of those who enrol to study at a distance, it will be their first experience of tertiary level education. Some will be 'traditional' tertiary students, i.e. school or college leavers with appropriate certification. Others will be mature adult students (with or without appropriate certification), many of whom may wish to study while remaining in paid employment and/or responsible for dependent children or adults. There may be others who fit into neither of these categories but have their own reasons for wanting to study at a distance. A characteristic of distance education is that the student body tends to be more heterogeneous than its on-campus counterpart.

The Nature of the Problem

Levels of drop-out and withdrawal from distance education programmes at the tertiary level tend to be higher than for comparable on-campus courses and are a matter of concern to providing institutions. Those most at risk are the people experiencing tertiary level study for the first time: Potential problems may arise not only from the transition to tertiary level study, but also as a result of factors that are particular to distance education. Intending students about to embark on tertiary level distance education courses face problems that are both practical / organisational and educational / intellectual.

Any advice and guidance that can be offered to students (either before commencing their studies or early in their first year) should help them to examine and address these two main problem areas by considering (a) the suitability of distance education for their needs and circumstances, and (b) the intellectual demands of studying at the tertiary level. Because of the difficulties

inherent in trying to counsel potential students, new and intending students at a number of distance teaching institutions have been offered help and guidance by means of materials in which a student-centred approach has been adopted. Such materials, provided either at the institutional level or by individual courses or programmes, aim to enable individuals to realistically assess their expectations and aspirations in relation to the demands of tertiary study at a distance. The discussion which follows draws upon a review and analysis of materials intended to support students and/or potential students of the Open University in Britain or of tertiary level institutions teaching at a distance in Australia[1].

Practical and Organisational Considerations

Most distance learners study primarily in their own homes and academic work may not be the main call upon their time and energies - they may have to fit their studies around other commitments and responsibilities, most notably the demands of family and occupation. Intending students need to make a realistic appraisal of what studying will involve in terms of costs, time, access to facilities and, less tangibly, support for their endeavours from family, friends and colleagues. The benefits they expect to gain from studying can then be considered in relation to those factors. Are there other ways of achieving the desired outcomes?

How much will it cost? Some of the expenses involved in tertiary distance education are fairly easy to assess, for example registration and course tuition fees. Other costs are more difficult to anticipate with any accuracy, for example books, stationery, postage and other course-related expenses. For some there may be costs arising from their need for time in which to study, e.g. overtime earnings or vacations foregone, child care expenses, etc.

How much time will studying involve? The time needed for studying may be greater than anticipated. Distance learners must assess not only how much time they will need to devote to their academic work, but also what periods of time they have available for study purposes during each day or week.

Exhibit 1 provides a simple example of a blank study schedule for students to complete.

Access to study facilities? A distance learner needs to have access to a suitably quiet place in which to study without being disturbed. Some courses may also necessitate uninterrupted access to other facilities, for example television or video equipment, an audio-cassette player, telephone, a home computer and possibly even the kitchen sink (in order to undertake scientific experiments)!

What effects will there be on family and social life? As a consequence of the previous three sets of factors, distance learners need to be aware of the possible disruption to their family and social life. Each individual needs to review their own situation and to consider how best

to accommodate and/or compensate for any disruption involved.

Exhibit 2 shows some activities to enable students to assess their situation.

Extent of support from family and friends? No matter how committed distance learners may be, their ability to maintain a high level of motivation and to successfully complete their tertiary studies often depends upon the support and encouragement they receive from their family, friends and, where appropriate, colleagues at work. Intending students must consider the implications of their studies for the other people in their lives and they should explore and discuss these with the individuals concerned.

Exhibit 3 is an exercise to help students examine the support they may get from others.

All these considerations need to be set against whatever gains the intending student hopes to achieve as a result of tertiary study.

What is to be gained from studying? Everybody has their own reasons for wanting to undertake tertiary study - academic, personal and vocational factors may be involved to a greater or lesser extent for any individual student. It is important that intending students be clear about their aspirations and expectations before committing themselves to any course of study.

Exhibit 4 provides a way of getting students to make explicit their reasons for studying.

Educational and Intellectual Considerations

For those entering tertiary education for the first time, there may be a lack of clarity about the intellectual demands of the studies they are about to commence. For many adult students, a considerable time may have elapsed since they were last engaged in formal educational activities. Intending students need not only to make a realistic appraisal of their existing competence in the subject to be studied, but also to develop an awareness of the educational and intellectual processes involved in tertiary level studies.

Appraisal of existing knowledge and skills in subject Self-completion diagnostic tests can be provided to enable students to ascertain their existing knowledge and skills in the subject to be studied. Such tests could be accompanied by remedial teaching materials. It may be more appropriate to provide counselling advice aimed at helping students to identify their strengths and weaknesses and to target those parts of the substantive course of study that need particular attention.

Exhibit 5 is an example of a self-completion activity.

Intellectual skills involved in learning at tertiary level What does studying at tertiary level involve in terms of intellectual skills? An adult learner, interviewed just after starting a tertiary level distance education course, was asked: "What exactly do you mean by learning?" The answer was as follows:

> "Well I don't know really .... When I do think about learning I'm still very much at school sort of thing and I know it's a very different sort of learning .... at the moment I'm still in the school sort of learning: the facts and dates and names learning rather than content. And if I read something .... I have read it and I think 'What have I just read?' .... At the moment I feel worried about not taking in what I am doing or what I am learning. I still feel very confused about it...." (Morgan, *et al*, 1981)[2]

The reply clearly shows the frustration that can arise from appreciating that learning at the tertiary level is qualitatively different from school learning, while not having a clear conception of what tertiary learning involves.

Research in Sweden (Säljö, 1979)[3] identified five qualitatively different conceptions of learning held by students in a wide variety of educational situations. Learning was seen as:-

i. a quantitative increase in knowledge;
ii. memorising new information;
iii. the acquisition of facts, methods, procedures, etc. which can be retained and utilised when necessary;
iv. the abstraction and construction of meaning;
v. an interpretive process aimed at the understanding of concepts, ideas or aspects of reality.

While the first three conceptions are concerned with the passive accumulation and reproduction of knowledge that is external to the learner, the fourth and fifth conceptions involve the active construction of meaning which is related to reality and experience.

A similar range of conceptions were found to be held by new tertiary students learning at a distance with the Open University (Morgan, *et al*, op. cit.). The ways in which those students went about the task of studying was determined, to a large extent, by the conception of learning held by each. Some adopted approaches to studying that were inappropriate for successful completion of tertiary level courses.

In conventional on-campus situations, students are able to develop as learners by becoming aware of the intellectual demands of their studies through a range of formal and informal contacts with teaching staff and fellow students (Perry, 1970)[4]. In distance education such informal contacts are usually minimal; reference is frequently made to 'the isolation of the distance learner' and not only in terms of geographical factors. It is all the more important to make explicit the nature of the learning that students are expected to undertake *within* the teaching of courses. Separate 'study skills' packages are likely to be wholly inappropriate for students with naïve conceptions of learning. What is needed is guidance and advice that will bring about a better understanding of the

nature of learning. In attempting to develop skill in learning, the important questions to be addressed begin with 'why' rather than 'how".

Exhibit 6 is an extract from an activity intended to enable students to reflect upon their learning situation and approach to studying. Exhibit 7 (from the same course) is part of an exercise to assist students to examine their expectations of what is involved in learning at the tertiary level.

Conclusions

If distance teaching institutions are seriously concerned about attracting and retaining students on their courses, it is essential that new and intending students be enabled to address, in a student-centred way, potential problem areas of the kind described above. However, it is particularly difficult to successfully counsel students at a distance. Nonetheless, evaluation studies of preparatory materials and activities aimed at developing students as learners have been conducted at the Open University with very encouraging results (Lockwood, 1986)[5].

It seems that in addition to the development of materials intended to enable new and intending learners to examine their expectations of tertiary study, efforts must be put into demonstrating to them the value and importance of pre-course counselling.

References

1. Graduate Diploma in Distance Education Course Team (1985) *Unit 6, Student Support in Distance Education.* Adelaide, Australia: South Australian College of Advanced Education.

2. Morgan, A., Gibbs, G. and Taylor, E. (1981) What do Open University students initially understand about learning? Study Methods Group Report No. 8, Institute of Educational Technology, The Open University (mimeo).

3. Säljö, R. (1979) Learning about Learning. *Higher Education* 8, pps. 443-451.

4. Perry, W. G. (1970) *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years.* New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

5. Lockwood, F. (1986) Preparing students for distance learning. *Open Learning,* 1 ; 1.

Exhibits

The illustrative examples are from:-

Pre-Enrolment Package 1 for Off-Campus Students
The Counselling Unit & The External Studies Unit, Tasmanian State Institute of Technology, Australia.

Preparing for the Mathematics Foundation Course
Mathematics Faculty & Preparation Team, The Open University, U.K.

Studying at University
D102, Social Sciences: A Foundation Course, The Open University, U.K.

Guide for Applicants (Draft revisions)
The Open University, U.K.

Exhibit 1

Exercise 3 Think back over the last week and record the amount of time you could devote to studying.

	Morning	Afternoon	Evening
Sunday			
Monday			
Tuesday			
Wednesday			
Thursday			
Friday			
Saturday			
Total			

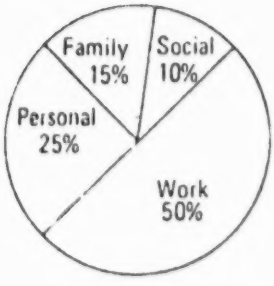
Could you make enough time available?

STEP ONE

WHAT IS YOUR SITUATION AT THIS MOMENT?

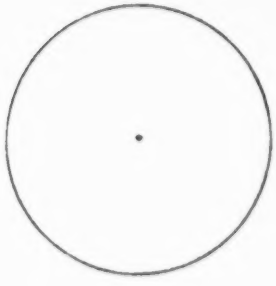
How do you distribute your use of time and energy at the present? Complete the first circle showing the percentage of time in relation to how you see your life at the moment.

EXAMPLE



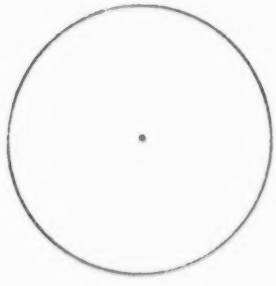
STEP ONE

ACTUAL SITUATION



STEP TWO

PREFERRED SITUATION



STEP TWO

HOW WOULD YOU PREFER TO SEE YOURSELF ?

Having completed Step 1, now look at your distribution and try to be aware of your feeling of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the distribution.

Re-examine your allocations until you arrive at the distribution that you feel happy with.... that is, how you would like it to be. DO THAT NOW. Remember no distribution is "right", or "better" but you are free to have it just as you wish.

Exercise 2 On the whole how have your family, relations, colleagues/people at work and friends reacted to your decision to apply to study with the Open University? (Tick just one answer in each column).

	Spouse Boyfriend/ Girlfriend	Relative	People at Work	Friends
1. Very happy and generally encouraging				
2. Fairly happy about it, but have some reservations				
3. Don't mind, not bothered either way				
4. Disapprove, can't understand why I bother				
5. Totally opposed to it				
6. Don't know why I'm taking the course				
7. I don't know how they feel				
8. Not applicable/not employed etc				

NOTE If you 'don't know how they feel' perhaps you should find out!

WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?

You obviously have *some* interest in studying externally because of your initial enquiry. Before you make your decision, it is important that you *now* consider what you hope to get from such study. You probably have more than one anticipated gain, along with some doubts.

Some reasons often given for study are:

- *This study will increase my job satisfaction.*
- *Study will provide job advancement and salary increase.*
- *This will provide an activity and area of personal endeavour.*
- *I have abilities I don't think I am using to the full and study will provide an opportunity to develop these.*
- *I will find academic study personally exciting and satisfying.*
- *I feel that I need a degree.*
- *I have a genuine interest in the subject and I would like to learn more.*
- *The extra qualifications will increase my job security.*
- *Success in study will increase my self esteem.*
- *It will increase my personal status in society.*
- *I want to increase my job prospects.*

ARE ANY OF THE ABOVE REASONS YOUR REASONS FOR STUDY?

(circle the dot beside those appropriate to you)

WRITE DOWN ANY OTHER REASONS WHICH COME TO MIND.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Exhibit 5

	level of knowledge	amount of work to be done
Module 5 Circles, Angles, Triangles		
Module 6 Quadratic Equations, Algebraic Formulae		
Module 7 Graphs, Simultaneous Equations		
Module 8 Trigonometry		
Module 9 Indices, Logarithms		

I've never studied this before.
I've seen this before but I've forgotten it now.
I can recollect this vaguely.
I have studied this but need more practice.
Yes, this looks reasonably familiar.

I shall have to work this module in great detail.
I shall skim through this module quickly just working the exercises.
I need to study only the sections on radians in this module.

Exhibit 6

2.1 HOW ARE YOU DOING SO FAR?

Since you have just finished your first piece of social science study for this course – the unit on vandalism – perhaps this is a good point to begin to check your progress. Try the following quiz. Please tick appropriate boxes.

---

1 How long did it take you to read the piece on vandalism?

- ☐ (a) Less than 2 hours
- ☐ (b) 2 to 4 hours
- ☐ (c) 4 to 6 hours
- ☐ (d) 6 to 8 hours
- ☐ (e) 8 to 10 hours
- ☐ (f) More than 10 hours

2 How did you tackle the task of getting through the reading?

- ☐ (a) Started on page 1 and ploughed on till I reached the end at one sitting
- ☐ (b) Set out to read for 2 hours at a stretch
- ☐ (c) Read for 3 to 4 hours, but taking a break every twenty minutes
- ☐ (d) Dipped in for short spells over a period of days
- ☐ (e) Other

3 Did you get distracted often?

- ☐ (a) Yes: people constantly coming and going and chatting
- ☐ (b) Yes: phone-calls, interesting TV programmes, etc.
- ☐ (c) Yes: after a few [illegible]uld make a cup of coffee

PART 3: WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO BE A FIRST-RATE STUDENT?

KEY

How important is it?
5 = absolutely essential
4 = very important
3 = useful if you've got it but not essential
2 = might be useful sometimes
1 = unlikely to be useful
0 = irrelevant

How do you stand?
5 = I think I am quite outstanding in this respect
4 = I am probably well above average
3 = I imagine I am average or just above
2 = I imagine I am average or just below
1 = I assume I am pretty poor
0 = I am hopeless

	The ideal D102 student	**How important is it?**	**How do you stand?**
1	Has a photographic memory	☐	☐
2	Can read at more than 600 words a minute	☐	☐
3	Rarely has to struggle to understand what he or she reads	☐	☐
4	Can extract the essence of a book in one swift reading	☐	☐
5	Writes effortlessly – knocks-off essays at first draft, in 2 or 3 hours	☐	☐
6	Needs little sleep and can study deep into the night	☐	☐
7	Has a bro[illegible]iled general knowledge (e[illegible]half the answers who[illegible]*v Challenge*)	☐	☐

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